

A View on Libraries and Librarians in Digital Humanities

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Libraries find themselves at the intersection of a number of issues in higher education, including labor equity, digital pedagogy, technology networks, and community partnerships. These issues manifest in a variety of ways as faculty, staff, students, and librarians form collaborations within and among institutions. Project teams that form around digital humanities (DH) work offer an opportunity to examine these larger issues. By bringing these chapters together we give voice to a diverse range of experiences that build a deeper understanding of the challenges DH partnerships face and defines the value that makes these challenges worth surmounting.

What it means to do digital humanities work varies widely across the chapters in this book. For Taylor et al. DH is inseparable from public humanities; for Heftberger, DH is a vehicle for independent scholars and facilitates the breakdown of traditional academic hierarchies; for Chesner et al., it is a means for creating a foundation from which new questions can be explored; and for Risam and Edwards, it is a vehicle to challenge labor equity among students, faculty, and librarians. Each chapter is a microcosm of the challenges of working in liminal spaces and structures in higher education.

We gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which people are navigating the complexities of partnerships in higher education. A major theme we found running through the chapters was the nature and division of work among the partners. The nature of the work includes material and social practices and the division of work includes partners whose work is sometimes unacknowledged. This theme pervaded the three sections that emerged: Labor and Roles, Networks and Infrastructure, and Archives, Community, and History.

The authors in the first section ‘Labor’ explicitly deal with the dynamics that are visible in DH partnerships. As they explore hierarchies of labor, we have the opportunity to dig into why the labor of librarianship is undervalued. For example, Risam observes that when she was working as a partner with Edwards, her faculty colleagues were more likely to treat her as a service provider than as a collaborator. As Risam developed skills and expertise in digital tools and methods, these material practices signaled ‘service’ to her faculty peers. They presumed that because she was sharing her knowledge of tools and processes, she must be outside their peer group.

Building on this discussion of labor, authors in the second section ‘Networks’ examine how project networks form, and how the tensions inherent in the social and technical infrastructure of academic institutions are laid bare by the scope of their DH work. The authors frame the library as a democratizing force on campus and consider how the library equalizes the networks, tools, and expertise needed to conduct this work. Glass argues that libraries should work with campus partners to build participatory spaces that nurture collaborative, informal research practices. By using open-source software,

these community-driven, networked digital spaces become laboratories for exploring the role of software in writing, thinking, and communicating. Both Emmanuel and Schuster articulate the value of building close working relationships among the people who perform the labor of the infrastructure.

The final section 'Community' explores the material and social practices of building partnerships with students and community members through DH work centered on local archival material. Starting DH in the archives allows the authors in these chapters to ground pedagogy in collaborative, material practices for students (see Brannock et al.). Issues of labor and infrastructure run throughout these chapters as authors explore the complexities of roles and responsibilities within partnerships, yet the focus is on students, community, and recovering lost voices from history. Hubbard and Ryan explore this while working with students on a project about the Watts uprising of 1965. This episode in history exposes social injustice and students today are grappling with how to illuminate these rare materials held in a community archive. While examining power structures and cultural differences through collection and dissemination, students take on the roles of archivists. Students come to understand the power of metadata and description to help or hinder access.

Descriptions of the labor performed by librarians were the most compelling to us. As the chapters demonstrate in practice, much of the literature on DH and libraries describes the challenges for librarians in finding their place in the work. What does it take to offer both ad-hoc services and develop deep collaborations? The librarians in these chapters are most often collaborators and integral to the projects. It is not 'how can I help you?'. It is 'what can we work on together?' Much has been written about this shift in librarianship from supporting to collaborating. (See Braunstein, 2017; White and Gilbert, 2016; Hartsell-Gundy et al., 2015; Nowvskie, 2014) This shift comes into direct conflict with the historic self-perceptions of librarians as well as how they are generally perceived by faculty and administration. Just as libraries are often seen as a supporting unit to academic enterprise, librarians are often seen as a supporting class. However, the chapter authors here describe the value of forming collaborations rather than service relationships. We see this echoed in the literature, such as Miriam Posner's assertion, that what DH needs is collaborators, not supporters. (2013)

DH projects bring forward different ways of valuing librarians' work and even expand the range of activities recognized as academic labor. These activities include a variety of material practices such as those listed by Burdick, et al., "the basic building blocks of digital activity: digitization, classification, description and metadata, organization, and navigation" (2012) as well as more traditionally material activities such as working with books, inkjet printers, 3D printers, etc.¹ This expanded view allows us to also

¹ We are grateful to Bethany Nowvskie's chapter, 'Resistance in the Materials,' in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, where she describes the importance of maintaining control over one's materials, tools, and

acknowledge and value this labor when it is performed by collaborative groups which include students and staff, other often under-recognized contributors to DH work.

Acknowledging material and social practices of academic labor², which are particularly visible in DH work, helps us move closer to a more fully developed humanist understanding of academic labor. To thus acknowledge these overlooked components is to dispel what Bruno Latour calls the “mind-in-a-vat’ model that produces the myth of disembodied intellectual work (1999).³ This image clearly leaves out the range of practices in academic work, as well as the role of project networks.

Because this expanded view of labor is not built into the tenure-driven structures of higher education, librarians and faculty often miss opportunities to build diverse coalitions to advocate for the humanities, digital or not, as well as humanistic education more broadly. If we value the material practices of scholarship, regardless of who performs them, then we value the fundamental humanist nature of librarianship.⁴ In order for humanities education to thrive, we must activate the material and social aspects of academic labor by forming collaborative relationships such as those described by the authors in this book.

The chapters refreshed our sense of the intellectual labor librarians perform, one that we didn’t see being framed in quite this way in our graduate education to become librarians. So what types of labor are librarians actually doing that are brought forward by DH partnerships?

- Creating a tool or work based on one or more research questions.
- Making meaning out of a broad base of information as well as formulating discipline-specific questions.
- Designing methods for research discovery.
- Creating information-literate students through partnering in pedagogy, and teaching our own students critical thinking and information skills.
- Applying and sharing expertise in current research and scholarly information environments.
- Developing controlled vocabulary and metadata schemas.
- Contributing technical expertise with a variety of digital tools and methods that give research material form.

time, and communicates the urgency of what is at stake if these three components of DH work are not valued.

² Although not an explicit topic of this book, emotional labor is evident throughout the chapters; it is the work that makes the reflections in these chapters possible.

³ For more on the relationship between Latour and the material practices of DH work, see Siddiqui, 2015; Muñoz, 2014; Burgess and Hamming, 2011.

⁴ We are indebted to Trevor Muñoz’s chapter, ‘Recovering a Humanist Librarianship through Digital Humanities’ in *Laying the Foundation: Digital Humanities in Academic Libraries*, 2016.

- Cultivating networks of people. Operating from a broad constituency base and bringing networks together. Navigating relationships with people who have varying expertise.
- Synthesizing activities and concepts being explored across departments and schools
- Drawing out articulations of questions, reframing or contextualizing questions, managing expectations, and contingency planning, i.e. traditional library reference and consultation work.
- Bringing their own interpretive, professional framework to the collaboration.

Understanding librarians as colleagues has the potential to significantly impact higher education, and DH is one area where this is becoming more visible. It is exciting to be part of this work and part of reframing the value and understanding of the labor of librarians. We believe the partnership element is vital for both faculty and librarians, and central to expanding views of digital scholarship, pedagogy, and labor equity. It is our hope that by sharing narratives of diverse partnerships, librarians and those with whom they collaborate will find kinship amongst the vivid particularities, find their self-perception challenged, and become more flexible in reframing their roles.

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